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Masculinities in Captain Fantastic and how the setting affects them

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TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

Título

Masculinities in *Captain Fantastic* and how the setting affects them

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1. ABSTRACT

Ante la ausencia de material académico encontrado acerca de la película *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) pretendo llenar el espacio en blanco sobre la misma estudiando las masculinidades de algunos de sus personajes. Los tres hombres que van a ser puestos bajo la lupa son los personajes con más importancia tanto en la cantidad de tiempo que pasan en la pantalla como en la relevancia de sus acciones para la trama.

El método de estudio de masculinidades que voy a emplear está basado en el libro de Pat Kirkham y Janet Thumim *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (Kirkham & Thumim, 1993). Habrá más información al respecto más adelante en la parte dedicada al método.

El proceso consiste en analizar cada personaje desde varios enfoques, esto me ha permitido tener una idea más global de qué es la masculinidad y cómo se representa en cada uno de estos personajes. Las partes se complementan las unas a las otras formando un ente global que cambia conforme cambian las circunstancias en las que vive cada personaje. El cambio es un elemento fundamental en las masculinidades estudiadas en este ensayo, ya que encontramos evolución (a veces positiva y a veces negativa) en los hombres de la película.

Due to the lack of academic content found about the film *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) I aim to throw some light on it through the study of the masculinities of some of its characters. The three men that are going to be subject of study are those that have more weight both on the amount of time they spend on screen and on the importance of their actions for the plot.

The method of study of masculinities I am going to apply is based on Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim's book *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* (Kirkham & Thumim, 1993). There will be more information about it later on in the part devoted to the method itself.

The process consists on analyzing each character from several points of view (sites). This has allowed me to have a more global idea of what is masculinity and how it is represented in each one of the characters. The different parts complement each other forming a global idea that changes as the circumstances each character lives in do.

Change is an essential element for the masculinities studied in this essay as we find evolution (sometimes positive and other negative) in the male characters that appear in the film.

Keywords: *Masculinity, Change, Roles, Sites, Action.*

Masculinidades, Acción, Cuerpo.

2. INTRODUCTION

The first step on my decision about doing my final dissertation was to decide whether I was going to do it about literature or about cinema. Along the degree I have had the opportunity of studying and doing essays on both disciplines and I finally decided to write it on a movie.

The reason why I chose to work on *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) was mainly the innovation. As it is a recent movie, I have not found any book or academic essay related to it so my essay will not be rewriting what someone else had said or to write about something that has already been discussed widely. Therefore, this essay aims to be ground-breaking not only because of the issues tackled but also because of the movie itself.

I was fascinated by *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) when I watched it and I knew it would be a great movie to work on. Matt Ross, the director of the film, is not very well known as he has not directed many movies so I knew this essay was going to be very innovative. However, this film has been a great success and some of the characters that appear in it are famous ones such as Viggo Mortensen, George MacKay or Frank Langella.

First, I thought about analyzing the protagonist, Ben Cash as the prototype of the American Hero, but soon I realized that there was not much to say about it. However, I soon realized that other approaches could be more suitable taking into account the nature of the protagonist and the behaviour and structure of the family.

The idea of the protagonist being Viggo Mortensen also triggered this decision as he is an actor who has had lots of roles as the manly leader. In this story I saw that there was a lot to say about his character in the movie: Ben Cash. He had lots of characteristics of what is associated to being a man as they live off the grid, they do not have the facilities of life in a city and in a modern society in general such as running water or supermarkets. The Cash family is basically living their dream, creating a micro-civilization within their property and living off the land. This relates to the stereotypical ideas about an issue as complex as manliness. As part of the home education, the whole Cash family will do strenuous physical challenges and prove their strength and endurance in activities such as rock climbing or hunting.

Hence, I finally decided to write the essay on the representation of masculinities in it. As I have said, there is nothing written about this topic in relation with *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) so I aim to fill a gap in the research of this particular approach. In

the movie we can find several male characters that are very different from one another. I aim to throw some light on the representation, construction and change of their masculinities along the movie.

3. METHOD

The method I am going to apply in this essay is the one that Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim developed in their book *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, which not only contains a theoretical part but also several essays from different authors that deal with masculinity in films. It is a method that has been usually applied when dealing with masculinities on screen, as this essay is going to do. This method is based on the study of several elements within the movie and the characters called sites, there are four of them:

The body: most of the times it is the first information we have about a character, it is what we see. However, this is not as simple as it may seem as it is composed both by what we observe on the screen and by what we already know about the actor, about the types of films he usually acts in, his life behind the camera... “By the body we refer to the visual representation of the male, to dress, to the spectacle of the male body [...] we refer also to the actor’s presence, his star persona” (Kirkham & Thumim, 11-12)

The action: This site refers to the series of actions carried on by the characters that are considered exponents of masculinity. These actions can take different forms as masculinity is a complex element that can be understood in several ways. However, it is especially important to consider the training of a character, the disciplinary preparation that gets the mind and the body of the character ready for whatever it is to come in the movie: “The male epic [...] offers “heroes” who are strong both physically and morally, [...] Several essays deal with filmic representation of training for action, and of the acquisition of survival skills” (Kirkham & Thumim, 15)

The external world: This site, unlike the previous ones, focuses more on the male characters as a community rather than as individuals. It deals with the relation and the hierarchy between men in the movie and the struggles amongst them. “The external world we use here to indicate filmic representations of the public interaction of male characters with each other and with the conventions and institutions against which they operate.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 12)

The internal world: Finally, this site studies the mind of the male character. The ideas, fears, beliefs...all in all, the psychology and the elements that may not be easily

perceived physically but that can play a very important part in the movie. “The internal world, which we use to refer to the experience and articulation of being, from the inside, as it were.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 12)

Sometimes the same scene can be studied not only from a single point of view or site but from several ones as they are not totally hermetic compartments and instead they complement each other. For instance, a scene can therefore be studied taking into account the importance of the body and what it is representing but also as part of the external world.

Kirkham and Thumim’s method is relatively new as the book which contains it was published in 1993. The study of masculinities has remained in the shadow for a long time as nowadays the studies dealing with gender and patriarchy deal most of the times with the role of women and feminism in general.

4. SETTING

Along *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016) the characters go through very different settings and environments. Each one of them is associated with a way of living, which is essentially what makes the family in the story different from the others. Change is important for this essay as the role of men in the story changes along both the temporal line and the spatial line. These are the mayor settings of the story:

Utopia: What we know from the parents but that does not directly appear on the story is that before living in the woods they had a regular life in a city and went to university. This is relevant as it means that they were part of the American society and shared their customs. After they start to live together and have their first child, Bo, they decide to break with the social norms and values from their country and instead they live in a farm. This is going to be the start of what is going to be the main setting of the story: the camp in the woods. In that place they have totally broken up with society, they live isolated and have their own customs. In fact, the characters are going to be fully self-reliant and self-sufficient. This is a very important element to take into account in relation with their mentality, which is that of breaking with society. The children in the story are highly trained (both physically and mentally) and they are not going to have any problems when living in the utopia they have as home and instead there will be a clash when they meet the real world.

The term *utopia* is very meaningful when dealing with the camp, the mother defines their home as “Plato’s republic” and says it is paradise. However, the clash between the property where they live and the real world is so big that the children will not know how to act outside their utopia as they have lived in a parallel and uncorrupted reality. In this place is where the characters are going to forge their personality. They are going to find their identity and their position in the group, which is going to be changing and being challenged as they abandon the utopia they live in and face the real world.

The Road: This is also an important scenario when we approach the movie as a big part of it takes places there. It is going to be portrayed as a middle ground between the reality they live and mainstream America. The first scenes of the road are that of a little one that runs through forests and soon they enter the outskirts of a city, where they discover elements from capitalism such as shopping malls from the safety of the bus

they are travelling in. The children soon discover and are attracted by things they had been kept away from in their property. For example, they are going to ask for Coca-Cola or hotdogs, which appear to be something totally unknown by them.

Also, they are going to carry on with their wild way of life, and the children are going to be shocked when they realize that it is not like home. For instance, when Vespyn is trying to hunt a sheep she is astonished as she can get extremely close and even be seen by the animals without scaring them. This seems to deeply upset her as she realizes that not even animals are still wild.

The Grandfather's House: This is going to be the setting of the story for a short period of time in the story but it is going to be very relevant. This was the home of Leslie's parents and it is where they are going to stay after Ben is defeated by Jack. This house is completely different from the one Ben's family lives in. Jack is a rich man so the house has big screens and a big, neat garden as well as other luxuries.

In the story Rellian decides to stay there with his grandfather, challenging Ben and later on in the film the rest of the children appear to be going to stay. In this setting Ben seems to lose all his power and status among his family, which is breaking up with their previous life and embracing the mainstream one.

All in all, the grandfather's house is going to be the opposite of the life and values the children have been raised in and therefore living would have meant a milestone in their lives.

As we can see, the settings vary widely as the story goes on. The change of environment is going to be important when dealing with masculinities because of several reasons: Ben, the leader of the family, is going to finally be challenged by Jack, who is the leader of another family. The result of this confrontation is going to be that the children are meant to stay with Jack and Ben has to leave.

The change of environment is also going to be life-changing for Bo, who has had problems when connecting with young women. While they are travelling he is going to meet a girl and reach maturity in matters of affection.

In the end of the story the family is going to go back to a unique environment as they are going to live in a farm. This is by far not as extreme as the location they lived before the journey but is going to be a middle ground between the two opposites.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. THE BODY

5.1.1. VIGGO MORTENSEN (BEN)

Viggo Mortensen is the protagonist of *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016). He is going to be the first one to be explained as the character he plays (Ben Cash) is the most important one in the movie. Physically, Mortensen has been changing his appearance a lot, having different hairstyles and facial hair. In relation with the star persona, this character has very manly facial traits, which have helped him get very masculine parts in movies. His background is indeed very relevant: in *Eastern Promises* (Cronenberg 2007) he plays the role of the leader of a Russian mafia in the United States while in *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001), his most successful movie, he plays the role of Aragorn, who is actually the leader of Men in the story. His performance in those two movies is compared to the one studied in this essay in a *Rolling Stone* Review “And Mortensen is just magnificent: His performance standing with his career-best work in *The Lord of the Rings*, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*. He gets under the skin of this loving father who is unafraid to face the world naked and yet touchingly ready to grapple by the possibility that his arrogant, free spirit might actually do harm to his children.” (Peter Travers, 2016)

In this last movie he is portrayed as the ideal of man in opposition with the rest of characters (dwarfs, elves, orcs...), which belong to different fantastic races. In this last movie he is portrayed with a beard and long hair.

Other great films in which he appears are *G.I. Jane* (Scott 1997), where he plays the role of Master Chief John James Urgayle, a brutal army instructor whose job is to turn civilians into soldiers. This is another case in which his facial hair distinguishes him, the Master Chief, who wears a moustache from the recruits, who are clean shaven.

Those may be the most relevant masculine roles in his career, but there are other films where he has very masculine roles such as in *Alatriste* (Díaz 2006) or in *The Road* (Hillcoat 2009). Therefore, and based on his own life hobbies such as outdoor sports (skiing) it is safe to think that we are expecting him to be a strong character with great leadership. In fact, in the movies previously named, he is always the leader or the boss, and so it is going to happen in *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016).

Finally, based on an interview to George Mackay we have some information about Viggo Mortensen's life as he has elements in common with the character he interprets and that way of life: “Viggo brought a canoe, Viggo brought lots of stuff: he

brought a lot of clothes, he helped build the garden, he brought lots of books” (MacKay, 2016)

The other part of the body is his physical appearance and how this is important in the study of masculinities in cinema. As we know, a big part of cinema are the images that appear on the screen, in fact, in the beginning of this art there was no voice recording.

In the first scene when we see Ben Cash (Viggo Mortensen), the protagonist of the movie, covered in mud, with blood in his hands and with a knife (F01). This is a very powerful image as it conveys that this character is going to be totally wild. In fact, he has just taken the heart of a deer after it was killed by his son, Bo.



F01

During most part of the film, Ben is going to have a great beard; this element differentiates him from the rest of the males in the story: “Mortensen, looking his most mountain-man handsome, is winning and charismatic, walking on the knife’s edge between principled and unhinged.” (Moylan, 2016)

However, this is going to be the only physical element that changes in this character throughout the movie as he is going to shave it. This happens when he believes he has lost his battle against Jack, his brother in law, who apparently is going to keep Ben’s children. He is in a way defeated as a father, which is one of the pillars on which manhood is based, although the end of the story is going to be a big turn of events.



F02



F03

Also, he is presented as a very strong man “Strength is frequently used as yardstick of dominant masculinity” (Kirkham & Thumim, 18). Along the movie there are scenes where he appears almost naked and there he is usually covered in dirt and where his tattoos can be seen. A great example of his physical fitness and strength is during a rock climb, where he is leading the ascension (F04).



F04

Finally, this character changes the clothes he wears and his appearance throughout the movie. However, there is something that is an omnipresent element: the necklace he wears. It is a *Mjolnir*, also known as Thor's hammer. It is a Nordic symbol associated with ferocity and to manliness as the myth says that only Thor (the god of protection, justice or war) is the only one who could lift it and use it.



F05

5.1.2. GEORGE MACKAY (BO)

The star persona of this character has varied a lot. As he started acting at a very early age, in his first movies he appears as a child. However, as he grew up, he started appearing in movies having a very different role, for instance, he acted as a soldier in *Defiance* (Zwick 2009) or in *Private Peaceful* (O'Connor 2012) and as a survivor of catastrophes and accidents in *Tsunami: the Aftermath* (Nalluri 2016) or in *For Those in Peril* (Wright 2013). However, he has also had other roles as student in *Hunky Dory* (Evans 2012) or as member of the LGTB community in *Pride* (Warchus 2014).

Based on the type of film he has done and on his personal life (he is a devoted actor and a descendent of a couple that work as a costume designer and as a stage manager) we expect him to interpret an intellectual character. This movie fulfils our expectations in this matter because although Bo (the character he is interpreting) already belongs to a highly learned family, he is the first one who wants to go to college. As we can read in the following quotation, the physical appearance of this character makes us see from the beginning that he does not really fit that way of living: “Bodevan (23-year-old British actor George MacKay, a slightly alien but appropriately youthful-looking choice)” (Debruge, 2016)

This character is Ben's eldest son and has many similarities with his father. For instance, they both wear the same haircut and are portrayed as very fit, muscular males. In the first scene of the movie this character appears covered in mud and is going to become a man by killing the deer and eating his heart after he is covered by his father in the blood of the animal (F06). Therefore, he is presented in a very violent way, slitting the throat of the deer with his knife, after that his father is going to put the blood of the animal on his face and say: "Today the boy is dead and in his place there is a man." This seems to be a rite of passage that will be later on explained in the site called the action.



F06

5.1.3. FRANK LANGELLA (JACK)

Frank Langella interprets the character of Jack, Leslie's father. His star persona is very wide as he started acting from a very early age, in fact, he has appeared in very different types of movies. During the 70s he became famous for his role as the protagonist of *Dracula* (Badham 1979) but as his appearance changed, so did his roles in films. One of his recent best known roles in films is that of Nixon in the movie *Frost/Nixon* (Howard 2009). This film gives a hint of the type of role he is going to be interpreting in *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016). The spectator will probably expect this actor to have the role of an authoritarian and even despicable character. And that is what his role is like in the movie we are dealing with:

"When Frank Langella shows up as Leslie's father, and expresses outrage at the way Ben raises the children, he sounds like the voice of reason. And yet the film treats Langella as though he's the villain, a self-satisfied Fat Cat, emblematic of everything Ben and his wife

(and their drone-children) hate. ("Look at the unethical use of space!" chirps one of Ben's daughters, looking at their grandfather's backyard." (O'Malley 2016)

The body of this character is the antagonist of the ones previously explained. This man represents the other side of the coin in the story: unlike Ben and his family, who have chosen to live off the grid, engaging in strenuous activities and healthy lifestyle, this character tries to have a comfortable, average existence. The body is one of the elements that are heavily influenced by politics in the movie as, although they live in the United States (a capitalist country) they live in their own bubble, having their own rules and being favourable to different political ideas. All these differences between the Cash family and the average American family can be seen in Jack:

He is portrayed as a rather old man, lacking the vitality present in Ben and Bo as well as the muscularity of the characters that have been previously mentioned. This is a physical and mental barrier between him and his grandchildren as he cannot keep up with them when doing their morning callisthenics and roughhousing with the younger ones.

He appears without a beard, but unlike Bo, who is smooth-chinned because of his age, he has decided to shave it. This is a major difference between Ben and Jack as the last one decides to shave as he must comply with the social norms and ideas while Ben does not shave and has a full beard.



F07

The way of dressing will also be a big contrast between Jack and the Cash family as although this character dresses in a very formal and serious way, with a standard suit. He is just an average man while on the other hand the Cash family wear old fashioned, flashy outfits.



F08

As we can see, it completely breaks the homogeneity of the rich, formal society Leslie belonged to and to which her father still does.

The physical appearance of the characters tells us a lot about what their roles are going to be like. The different characters we have analyzed are at different stages of their lives: Ben and Jack are adults and have distinctive manly traits such as, in the case of Ben, a full beard and big muscles. Bo is interesting because it is a man in the making, he is not purely a man nor a child. He shares physical traits with both Jack and Ben and that is going to be extrapolated to his way of thinking and his behaviour. His process of becoming a man and discovering life outside their utopia is going to be fostered by the journey. During the trip on the road he is going to start to enjoy an element of life he did not know such as kissing a woman and this is going to affect him both from the point of view of the body (he will cut his long hair) and of the action, as he will break with what he had been taught.

5.2. ACTION

5.2.1. VIGGO MORTENSEN (BEN)

From the point of view of the action, Ben appears in lots of scenes doing very masculine actions. Most of the actions that are considered as masculine by Kirkham and Thumim can be found in this film and especially in this character.

First of all, he is the leader of the family both physically and mentally. Everyday the family engages in strenuous activities such as rock climbing, as has previously been explained. However, we also find other examples of sport in the movie such as running up a mountain and training their muscles and their knife fighting skills. In fact, this has a big importance in their family as they live in a martial-like way. “Several essays deal

with the filmic representations of training for action, and of the acquisition of survival skills. Here it is the process of forming a body which will function effectively, to which audience attention is invited.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 15) Also, he is the one that leads and teaches his children about survival skill, hunting and trains them in the use of weapons and hand-to-hand combat.



F09

In this scene we find a moment when Bo has been defeated by his father and taken to the ground while practicing knife fighting (F09). He is totally submitted and does not challenge the authority of his father. This is one of the scenes of most violence in the story as, although there is not actual shedding of blood (they are just training), the family is training on how to act on a potential deadly situations: “Both sports and war films relate this collective training not only to male bonding but also to rites of passage from boyhood to manhood.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 16)

Also, they not only act in that way but they discuss the most effective ways of killing somebody such as weak points and organs that could be a good target. Hence, Ben has created a breed of highly fit and trained potential warriors. This reinforces the idea of masculinity as he is not only a strong and powerful man but also the leader of the rest of the family. However, his role is not only as a leader but also as a father, so he is very caring and sweet with his children, educating them also emotionally.

Rites of passage are another element present in the film that is one of the key points when analyzing the action in the story. “The questions of rites of passage is, it seems, a familiar ordering principle, particularly in films dealing with the socialisation of the young”(Kirkham & Thumim, 16). The greatest example of this occurs in the beginning of the story, when Bo hunts his first deer. In this case it involves the violent killing of an animal with a knife: “Opening somewhere so far removed from civilization that all we see are trees, the film plunges into the primordial Washington forest where

Ben (Mortensen, in full mountain-man beard) has organized a rite-of-passage hunting ceremony for his eldest son, Bodevan.” (Debruge, 2016)

It proves to be a final challenge that can only be achieved through the perfection of survival skills that have allowed him to get close enough to the animal by camouflaging and blending into the environment.

Due to the violence of the scene, including lots of blood and an agonizing animal, it could be interpreted as the passage from boy into a person being capable of killing with his own hand without remorse: “There is a stark contrast in the ways in which young male bodies are turned into fighting/killing machines in the war film” (Kirkham & Thumim, 16). In this case the rite of passage involves mud and blood, those being fluids associated to masculinity. “The bead of sweat, representative of bodily fluids, may allude to both vulnerability and power” (Kirkham & Thumim, 12). Bo is Ben’s right hand, his eldest son, and by passing this challenge he finally becomes a man: “Today the boy is dead and in his place there is a man.” This is the step that finishes Bo’s life as a child and becomes a man: “He puts the kids through fight training, boot camp drills and ushers his oldest son Bodevan (George MacKay) into manhood through the ritual of stalking and killing a deer solo.” (O’Malley, 2016) This is particularly appropriate because it is soon after this that Ben is told that her wife is dead and there is a blank to be filled, a gap in the hierarchy that needs to be taken by a member of the family, in this case Bo. This is a good example of how a same event or scene can be analyzed from several sites as this same scene has been analyzed from the point of view of the body.

Another instance when we find a rite of passage is when Ben creates a theft operation called “Mission Free the Food” in which Ben and his children enter a supermarket and steal food. This is seen as something positive by the father and later on they celebrate Noam Chomsky’s day and each of the sons and daughters of Ben is given a weapon. The younger ones receive combat knives while the elder sons receive hunting bows and arrows. When Jack discovers it, he does not react favourably and instead treats Ben as nothing else than a thief: “So you are teaching them to steal?”[...] that was part of their training / So you are training them to steal?” and finds outrageous that he had gave his children their own weapons: “That is the day you gave my grandchildren real weapons.”

Finally, Ben is not only the leader from a physical point of view as he is the strongest and more skilled of the family but also from the emotional point of view.

When he is told about the death of his wife he is the only one capable of remaining firm. He does that because as a father it is his duty to be someone his children can find shelter on. “Being a dad is perhaps the manliest job you’ll ever have. It’s a role that requires you to call upon hundreds of manly skills and attributes. You have to display leadership, manly compassion and strength.” (MacKay, 2009, 144)

This is something explained in Kirkham and Thumim’s book “The male epic, for instance, offers “heroes” who are strong both physically and morally, the former frequently offered as sign of the latter” (Kirkham & Thumim, 15)

5.2.2. GEORGE MACKAY (BO)

Just like as we saw in the body, this character is leaving boyhood behind and becoming a man in terms of the action. When his father is doing something else he acts as his lieutenant and is learning from him at all times. His action is determined by what he has been taught since his early years and this, unlike Ben’s case, is pure wilderness. He is not a man who has decided to leave civilization and to go live off the grid as his father had done but he was raised that way.

The scene of the deer, which has been previously analyzed in the body, can be studied from the point of view of the action. In fact, it is a very good example of the representation of manliness and violence. This scene perfectly fits what Kirkham and Thumim considered that the action was from the point of view of masculinity: “*Action* references various manifestations of the physical, including violence, competition, aggression, skill and endurance, in which these attributes are depicted in terms of the male body in action” (Kirkham & Thumim, 12)

As we can see in the following frame captures (F10 and F11), Bo’s successful killing of the deer is the result of a lot of practice, physical training and skill. By being able to do it right he has gained self-reliance and has left boyhood and become a man.



F10



F11

We also find other instances that can be understood as the action in the story as his manliness and his skills are turned into practice. For instance, he trains physically along with his father and his siblings.

However, masculinity is not only blood and sweat but also interaction with the opposite sex: women. Bo has just turned into a man and, as he has not lived in mainstream society and therefore interacted with other people for a long time, he is not even capable of speaking to women. In the first scene where he encounters women he seems totally petrified, unsure of what to do or say. When his father sees it he encourages him to go a talk to them but he feels insecure as he is not fit for society outside the utopia he is living in. However, this is not the last time in the film when he encounters women and later in the movie, when they are travelling to the funeral of the mother, they are going to do a stopover in a camping. There he is going to find his first love and is going to learn a lot. A relevant fact about that encounter is that he is going to lie about his origins, his life and his family. This makes the spectator think that he is ashamed of being different from the mainstream society and that not everything is as ideal as it may seem in the beginning of the movie. The reason why the girl approaches Bo and they start to talk is because he is putting his body into action as he is doing vigorous callisthenics and therefore doing a display of his muscles, his endurance and

his strength. This idea, again is linked to the body as in that scene Bo is training shirtless and the girl next to him is staring at him:

“The pleasures to be had in consuming the spectacle of the “perfect” male body are fraught with difficulties, not least because of the contradiction between the vulnerable passivity arguably implicit in the state of being-looked-at, and the dominance and control which patriarchal order expects its male subjects to exhibit.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 12).

In this scene, as a result of Bo being unable to properly socialize with women, it is the girl who seems to be in control of the situation. This, linked to the idea of lying about his own identity may seem contradictory, as explained in the quotation with the traditional idea of masculinity and control.

5.2.3. FRANK LANGELLA (JACK)

Jack is smaller, weaker and older than Ben, the man he is going to confront. This character is the leader of his family and a powerful man within the society he lives in. In the scene where he confronts Ben and shoots an arrow right next to his head we realize that he is a violent man and although he is not physically strong, he is still powerful:

“Just as strength is frequently used as a yardstick of dominant masculinity, so its opposite, weakness is used to signify lack of masculinity. [...] Related to strength and weakness, the hard and the soft, is the question of the size- the big and the little, tall and short, fat and thin. There is no doubt that size is an issue, for men, in relation to their masculine identity” (Kirkham & Thumim, 18)

The reason why the physical dominance of Ben does not imply that he will face and impose himself over Jack is because he is rich and has the help of the police.

His apparition in the movie is very short but despite that we have another example of masculinity regarding the action. In the scene where Jack has taken from Ben his younger son Rellian, who is going through a big crisis after the death of his mother which he is blaming on his father. Once he has taken him to his house, Jack “hunts” with his grandson. Although this is not done in the traditional way (with a real weapon and in the wilderness) and instead it is done through a videogame. Jack speaks to

him as if it was a real hunting experience “It is all about timing, just be easy, follow through”



F12

In this case the grandfather, who has taken Rellian under his wing, is taking him through a rite of passage consisting on killing animals, something he has not done along the movie. This is a way of bonding with his grandson and it involves the skill he is sharing with him through advices about shooting and hunting and the violence needed to kill an animal: “Both sports and war films relate this collective training not only to male bonding but also to rites of passage from boyhood to manhood.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 16)

Finally, the fact of taking Rellian away from his father is an offence and an act of extreme dominance. Again, although he is not a strong man he uses his allies (the police and lawyers) to win over the physical superiority of Ben. He threatens him with taking him to jail and tells him that if that happens he will lose his kids, as a result of this he is easily controlled by Jack through legal pressures.

As we have seen, the action and the body are closely linked. Dominance and masculinity are also closely linked to the deeds and the courage a character has. When the body becomes practical and the characters take action we realize that a strong, well-built physique without using it in situations where masculine behaviour is needed does not make a male a man.

“Being biologically male does not automatically bestow the status of manhood, and the latter quality, while found in various forms across different societies and cultures, often appeals to ideas of an essential, pre-modern masculinity that must be attained rather than granted and which emphasises action over intellect” (O’Brien, 2014, 10)

5.3. THE EXTERNAL WORLD

This site explores the relations between male characters in the movie within the patriarchal structure of society and how certain actions may challenge, consolidate or affect the power of each male individual: “In filmic representations of masculinity, associated issues such as status, hierarchy, knowledge, skill, language and success inform our understanding of the operations of male empowerment and control, whether this be exercised over events, people or emotions.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 19)

As the protagonist of the story, Ben is the link between the male characters we have dealt with in this essay and has connection with all of them.

Ben’s relation with his children is strong and hierarchical, although he is always open to discuss whatever worries them and a loving father: “Such utopias need a strong leader, and father Ben (Viggo Mortensen) is that. He treats his five kids as though they are military recruits (as well as PhD candidates).” (O’Malley 2016)

Bo, his eldest son, will challenge his status in the family along the movie as he will ask for a different, more normal life. From the beginning of the film we know that Ben has gone a little bit mad about their life in the woods. The radical vision of mainstream society he has leads Bo and his mother to hide the university applications. This is seen by Ben as if his own son had lied to him and feels deeply insulted as he feels he has betrayed him and the way of life they were raised in. However, the end of the movie will provide the outcome of this conflict which is that Ben accepts that Bo wants to go and travel abroad.

In the last scene of the movie when we see Bo when he is about to catch a flight, he receives the blessing of his father and the last lesson he will receive: “Always tell the truth, always take the high road. Live each day like it could be your last, drink it in. Be adventurous, be bold, but savour it. It goes fast. Don’t die.” In this scene we can see that Bo has decided to shave his head, differentiating himself from his family and getting a more socially-acceptable look. In the scene (F13) we can see down below we find a close-up shot before Bo finally leaves. In this moment the father will give his son the last piece of advice and a necklace, accepting him as a man.



F13

Along the movie the relation father-son between Ben and Bo implies that the protagonist takes care of the well-being of his son and teaches him life skills. However, this hierarchy changes along the story as Bo starts to be his father's lieutenant when he is not around and therefore upscales. Before telling his father about wanting to go to college there are some moments in the story when they challenge each other's strength, masculinity and dominance. For instance this occurs, as it has been in the action, when they are training hand-to-hand combat and Bo is defeated. As in the previous image, the shot (medium close up) used emphasises the importance of the moment and conveys a lot of meaning. In this case (F14) Bo is in the ground, in a submissive position after he has been defeated.



F14

The setting is very important in this site as the dominant position Ben has had in the utopia ends as he encounters an environment (the road and later on the grandfather's house) where his skills are no longer useful and where the physical strength of the individual does not have importance as the ruling is imposed by the authorities.

The relation between Ben and Jack in the movie is intense however brief. They both loved Leslie (Jack in a father-daughter way and Ben in a husband-wife way) and, after her death, on the one hand Jack wants to keep Ben from going to the funeral and performs a ceremony according to Christianity despite Leslie being a Buddhist. On the other hand, Ben wants to do what burn her body and spread the ashes as Leslie had requested in her Will. The two heads of family in the story are going to compete using the tools they have: Jack has the help of the police and of his lawyer and Ben has the help of his children.

Jack knows that the police is a helpful institution for him because if Ben is arrested, the authorities will take away his children from him. As a result of this, the protagonist of the movie cannot disobey him openly as is in a weaker position. When Jack explains Ben how easily he can have him jailed he simply says that: "Who do you think the police are going to listen to? Me? Or some hippie in a clown outfit?" also, when he wants to make Ben go away from his house, he calls a friend of his who is a police officer: "Listen, I think I just saw a prowler wandering outside on my grounds. I wonder if you would send a car. Yeah. Thanks."

These two quotations show how class affects the relations as Jack, as a well-off man, is in a higher position than Ben, who is higher from the moral point of view and that is more of a lower-class man.

"Social status is a significant indicator of power and the most unequivocal "heroes" discussed in this anthology are either born at the top of their particular social group or have risen to the top through sheer ability and/or special circumstances. Thus it is possible to have both the nobleman born to lead and the low born leader of the slave revolt occupy analogous positions of narrative and moral power within the male epic." (Kirkham & Thumim, 19)

Through this quotation we can see how Jack and Ben can be related to the two different types of masculine leaders: the rich, powerful man (Jack) and the poor man (Ben).

Ben's children have only had him and their mother as role models and they have grown in a very unusual environment. Their education has been a very good one, forming a critical opinion about society as well as learning maths, literature, languages... However, Jack does not think that home education is the proper way to teach their

grandchildren: “You told me they were going to school” and feels that they are not being prepared enough: “Even if they make it through whatever it is that you are doing to them, they are going to be totally unprepared for the real world.”

Jack, who lives outside the utopia Ben has created and that knows how to act according to the rules of mainstream society as he belongs to it (the grandfather’s house is a symbol of this community), wants them to have a normal education and life.

The relation Jack has with Bo and the rest of his grandchildren is an affective one. He wants to take care of them as he feels Ben’s method is insufficient as well as brutal (he claims that their training could be considered child abuse as they have bruises and injuries). Jack feels responsible for them and wants to adopt his grandchildren, basically stealing them from his legitimate father. This is a great example of how he imposes himself over Ben, who feels defeated and therefore leaves. After going away he will shave his beard, this is a sign of shame as he feels he has failed as a father, which is an important part of his role as a man: “One of the key masculine roles in all societies is that of the father.” (Powrie, Davies, Babington, 2004, 9)

Through the external world we realize that the action is defined not only as the use of the body but as a struggle of an individual to become respected, feared or admired by the rest of men in the community. Also, as we have seen in the case of Ben, a character with all features needed to be considered a respected man can be emasculated and disrespected if the interaction with the rest of men is not appropriated. In addition, we realize how important the setting is in this movie as the characters are growing and discovering through the trip to the mother’s funeral. They discover a different way of living (superficially from the bus in the road and then fully and in a more radical way in the grandfather’s house) and that the way they have lived is not the only one.

5.4. THE INTERNAL WORLD

5.4.1. VIGGO MORTENSEN (BEN)

Access to the internal world through the screen can sometimes be hard to get as the mind of the characters and their dreams can be difficult to film. In the case of Ben, the protagonist of the movie, we have some examples where we have access to his inner mind. For a long time and even nowadays dreams have been studied and interpreted as a way of revealing hidden elements about the character's psychology and repressed feelings.

The first example of the internal world of this character can be found after the death of his wife, Leslie: While Ben is dreaming he sees her face (F15), a close shot allows us to focus on her face and it gives the illusion of her being next to the protagonist in bed.



F15

This episode conveys a lot of meaning as for Ben she is not really dead and he is not ready to accept it. In this scene Leslie is going to communicate with Ben and says “Wake up, grizzly bear, my fantastic man.” She does not challenge or question the masculinity of the protagonist, who is called a bear, which is a very powerful animal. However, this scene is a very emotional one, showing the deep feelings and sensibility of Ben: “The male’s epic characteristic focus on definitions of masculinity produces, Hunt argues, a tension between “heroic” discourse of stoicism, sacrifice and self-sufficiency (signified visually by the bead of sweat) and a melodramatic discourse of emotion, vulnerability and love (signified visually by tears)” (Kirkham & Thumim,23)

Finally, this scene seems to be a flashback to another moment of his life, before his wife got ill and finally died. This conveys more meaning than the superficial one as it shows that the character is tied to his past. He cannot move on and instead he tries to

keep things exactly the same although nothing will be the same after the death of his wife. “Nothing is going to change. We will go on living in exactly the same way. We are a family.” The incapability of moving on will be an important trait along the movie as he is living a dream, behaving without taking into account the law and the social norms of mainstream society (stealing, sleeping under the stars in the suburbs of a city, interrupting a funeral...). This is going to change when he is threatened by Jack with having him arrested as Leslie’s father has good contacts with the police. As we can see, Ben’s power is reduced and he feels emasculated as Jack can impose his power over him in an environment that is not the utopia the Cash family lived in.

Another instance in the movie when we have access to Ben’s internal world can be found when he decides to shave. This happens just after he has been proven to be a bad and senseless father as his daughter Vespyr almost died as she fell from a house during one of his “operations”. After that he leaves his children at their grandparent’s house and leaves, feeling he has failed as a father. As we have previously analyzed from the point of view of the body, the fact of shaving when he has left his children can be interpreted as feeling as a failure: “I almost got you killed, sweetie”. By taking away his children Jack has also taken away his manhood, family and dreams. As a consequence he shaves and adopts a look much more acceptable by mainstream society. This has been previously studied from the point of view of the body but in this case it implies that Ben is surrendering to the rest of society and men (especially Jack), by doing this he is deciding to integrate something he hates. As we can see in *You Tarzan* taking risks is something associated to masculinity, however, in this movie the risk-taking will end up bad as Vespyr falls: “What these characters have in common is providing themselves not only by taking risks but also by taking more risks than anyone else and thus being more “manly”, in a perverse and destructive extension of the competitive ideal. These are the men who cannot say no to a challenge, cannot walk away from a dare.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 23)

5.4.2. GEORGE MACKAY (BO)

Bo is one of the most interesting characters from the point of view of the internal world. This character acts as a bridge between the two societies portrayed in the movie and has opened his eyes to what the world really is outside the false reality the Cash family is living in. The great example of how this character decides that he wants a life closer to the mainstream one is choosing to go to university. This institution is despised by his

father, who thinks his wife agreed with him although the reality was that she was helping their son send the papers needed in order to be accepted.

Wanting to go to university implies that this character wants to leave that unusual way of life and home education. This shocks his father deeply, who seems hurt by this “I don’t know what is more impressive: the fact that you got accepted into all these fine schools or that for months you have been lying directly to my face”. The answer shocks the father even more as Bo answers that “It was mom. She helped me with everything, we did it together, I just want to go to college.”

This situation is a result of Bo being able to see outside the world where they live, to go to civilization and realize that he is unable to socialize with anyone. “I know nothing. I am a freak because of you. You made us freaks. [...] Unless it comes from a fucking book I don’t know anything about anything.”

The other example of how we have access to his internal world is his reaction towards women. He does not know how to act in front of them and, as has been explained before, he gets paralyzed. This incapability of socializing with women could be interpreted as doubting of his own masculinity as portrayed in *You Tarzan*: “ This insight touches on the negotiations between people-men and women, men and men. [...] A problem of masculinity is its inability to deal adequately with “the other”. Men, this metaphor suggests, can’t speak.” (Kirkham & Thumim, 24)

The representation of the internal world has a lot to do with what is happening meanwhile in the external world. The interaction with the rest of the characters determine what is their psyche going to be like. Bo’s problem with socializing with girls could be a result of a missing mother that eventually is going to commit suicide. But this site is also going to foster the actions of the characters as it is going to give them the strength (as we have seen in the case of Leslie taking with Ben in his dreams) to do what they believe is correct.

5.4.3. FRANK LANGELLA (JACK)

As has happened along the movie, due to the short time this character appears on screen we do not have a lot of scenes and information to analyze. However, there is one instance that can be studied in this site: Jack’s negative reaction towards Ben coming to Leslie’s funeral can be interpreted from the point of view of the internal world. He believes Ben took his daughter and brought her to an early grave and as a result of this traumatic event he decides to keep Ben’s children. He takes advantage of the weak

position of Rellian as he is terribly affected by the death of his mother and his reaction is to blame it on his own father. Keeping Ben's children can be interpreted as a reaction deeply rooted in Jack's mind to that he can fill the gap left by the death of his daughter.

However, this can also be interpreted as revenge against Ben as he blames him for driving his daughter crazy. This last hypothesis would belong more to the external world as it deals with the relation between Jack and Ben.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The method I have applied in this essay is based on Kirkham and Thumim's introduction to their book *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*. Through the use of this approach I have been able to study the masculinities of three different characters in the movie *Captain Fantastic* (Ross 2016). The fact that this method consists of the study of four different perspectives, or as they call them, *sites*, has allowed me to better understand and study each one of the parts.

Also, as it has been explained along the essay, the setting where the story takes place has a lot of importance in relation to the status and the hierarchy among male characters. This film portrays how different men grow both physically and mentally, learning from experience that their way is not the only way. By getting to know and understand how other people live, the characters are able to make their own decisions based on a well-formed opinion, avoiding the radical way of seeing life that both mainstream Americans and the Cash family have in *Captain Fantastic* (Ross, 2016).

The two societies in the story understand masculinity in different ways, we can find that the characters are masculine in both cases but the elements that represent it are sometimes contradictory. For instance, both Ben and Jack are the heads of their respective families and live on the top of the patriarchal society, however, the relation they have with the rest of the family is not the same. Ben is much more progressive and understanding, always open to discuss the problems, issues and wishes of the rest of his family. However, the case of Jack is different as he imposes and executes whatever he thinks is correct (such as burying Leslie instead of incinerating her as she had requested).

Finally, through the study of masculinities in this film I have realized that masculinity is not something eternal and static. It is an element built through the actions of the characters, it is not necessarily given from the beginning of the story but something going to be constructed along the film. The two most important characters (Ben and Bo) are going to evolve. In the first case Ben is going to be emasculated and to learn that his role as a father is to listen to and really care for his children. In the second case Bo is going to use the status as a man he has been given by his father and decide to leave the family and to start living according to what he has learned both in his family and outside of it, making a more complete version of him as a man. The two male influences Bo has in his life could be extrapolated to the reality of other male characters in films, such as Hooper and Quint in *Jaws* (Spielberg 1975) "El policía tiene dos

modelos de masculinidad muy claros que le sirven de ejemplo (Hooper y Quint), optando por una solución intermedia que no se corresponde exactamente con ninguno de ellos pero que sin embargo consigue aunarlos como referentes” (Díaz-Cuesta, 2010, 233-234)

This essay has digged in the representation of masculinity in various characters in this movie (Ben, Jack and Bo) and the role they have within society as each one of them has a different position. They all are going to evolve and progress as the situations in the movie make each character change both physically and mentally. The setting therefore has had a crucial role as it has determined how masculinity changes through a film.

The possible applications of this essay would not only be around cinema and literature in general but also around gender studies as the issues presented and the particular approach used to study this film is closely related to it.

The male stereotype has evolved throughout history adapting to the ever changing reality of every epoch, especially in the last decades. This evolution is becoming more and more challenging and consequently more interesting with every change. A fascinating future for the male stereotype is in front of us.

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